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SUBJECT: THAI ELECTION: THAKSIN IN AN "AVALANCHE"

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11. (SBU) Summary: Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has won a massive mandate in the February 6 parliamentary election -- unprecedented in Thai history -- for a second term as Thailand's Prime Minister. The results are still unofficial (and won't be finalized for a few days), but reliable estimates on February 7 indicate that Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) will win over 370 constituency and party list parliamentary seats (out of a total 500) in the lower house of the Parliament. This strong majority will allow him to govern without coalition partners. The main opposition Democrat Party (DP) is likely to drop to 93 seats. DP Leader Banyat Bantadtan has announced his resignation. The Chart Thai (CT) party, which was in Thaksin's last coalition, looks to win 31 seats and will likely move into the opposition camp. Thaksin's opponents, now significantly reduced in power relative to the TRT party, warn gloomily that Thailand has fewer checks and balances and could be on the way to becoming less democratic as a one-party state. PM Thaksin, sounding a more conciliatory tone in victory, says that he will prove to his critics his good intentions for the country. With an absolute majority in Parliament apparently in his hands, Thaksin will be in a strong position to pursue his political agenda into the foreseeable future. In any event, the Thai people have clearly spoken, and made their preferences known. End Summary.

NO DOUBTS ABOUT A HUGE THAKSIN VICTORY

12. (U) Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party won in all regions of the country save for the Democrat Party's (DP) traditional base in the southern constituencies. According to morning after unofficial estimates on February 7, Thaksin could pick up over 370 constituency and party list parliamentary seats. According to surveys by media broadcasting and Nation TV, the TRT has won at least 67 of 76 seats in the northern region, 126 of 136 in the northeast, 79 out of 97 in the central region and 32 of 37 seats in Bangkok. The only region where the opposition Democrat Party (DP) prevailed was in the South where the Democrats reportedly won at least 48 of the region's 54 seats. TRT appears to have picked up over 60 of the 100 Party List seats. (These are national, non-constituency seats awarded proportionately to those parties who pick up five percent or more of the separate countrywide vote on party lists.)

13. (U) Voter turnout was estimated at 70% nationwide (i.e. over 31 million voters), with some areas in Bangkok reporting over 90% of eligible voters streaming to the polls on a hot, sunny Sunday marked by unusually light traffic in the capital. Voting was generally peaceful throughout the country (including in Thailand's trouble-plagued deep South), with only some reports of shooting near Korat in the country's northeast.

OFFICIAL RESULTS NOT AVAILABLE IMMEDIATELY

14. (U) By midday February 7, about 60 percent of the vote had been counted, Election Commission officials told us. Announcement of the official results should begin to come in over the next several days. According to article 159 of the Constitution, Parliament must be seated within 30 days of the election. The official results will likely be announced in tranches over the next several weeks. The law allows considerable leeway for challenges and, though most will not be sustained ultimately, scores of complaints of election illegalities will have to be considered. February 21 has been designated as the date for re-run elections if any February 6 contests are set aside for electoral law violations. The first tranche of official, handcounted results should be announced by February 9.

DEMOCRATS DRUBBED: NO OPPOSITION POWER TO CENSURE PRIME MINISTER

15. (SBU) If initial results hold true, the DP could end up with less than 100 seats in Parliament, including Party List seats. For the DP the vote dashed its hopes to win enough seats to be able officially to censure the Prime Minister. By law, the opposition needs over two fifths of the 500 seat

Parliament - at least 201 votes - in order to bring a censure motion against the Prime Minister. With an apparent win of over 370 seats, Thaksin looks to be comfortably beyond reach of his opposition, whether it be the DP alone or a coalition of the DP and the Chart Thai Party. Immunity from censure probably won't apply to Thaksin's cabinet - the opposition only needs over one fifth of Parliament, or at least 101 votes, to censure individual ministers. That could be done if DP and Chart Thai cooperate.

TRT LOSES DEEP SOUTH TO DP IN PROBABLE BACKLASH TO SECURITY POLICIES IN THE REGION

16. (SBU) One bright spot for the DP was in the three southernmost provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, where the Democrat Party made a political comeback to dominance, sweeping 10 of 11 seats. Six TRT incumbents were unseated. Chart Thai picked up one seat. Most of the new DP MPs in the deep South are younger new faces for DP. Their victories indicate a popular backlash to the government's heavy-handed security policy against Muslim separatist violence over the last year. In Nakhorn Si Thammarat, former Foreign Minister and DP leader Surin Pitsuwan survived a strong challenge from TRT (ref. D) and was re-elected to his constituency seat. (In the last election, Surin had been on the DP party list slate, but he had served five previous terms in the constituency.)

BANYAT RESIGNS

17. (SBU) Following its general debacle, the DP will have to decide on a new direction to revitalize the party. A change in leadership will be the first order of business and DP Leader Banyat Bantadhan has reportedly obliged by resigning "to take responsibility" for his party's defeat. The most obvious replacement for Banyat will be Deputy Leader Aphisit Vejjajiva. The young, telegenic Aphisit lost a bitter leadership contest to Banyat after former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai stepped down from the party's top post in 2003. The party will now likely turn to Aphisit as the one DP leader who might be able to compete with Thaksin on charisma.

CHART THAI POSITION UNCERTAIN

18. (SBU) The Chart Thai party, erstwhile coalition partner of the TRT, has unofficially won about 31 seats in Parliament, including what appears to be a clean sweep of its Suphan Buri stronghold in central Thailand (ref. A). The party also picked up a seat in Bangkok, its first in about 20 years. Flamboyant massage parlor tycoon Chuvit Kamolvisit, who joined the party following his strong showing in last year's Bangkok gubernatorial race (ref. H), appears headed for Parliament as a party list candidate. Initial vote counting of the nationwide party list ballots indicates that CT will get up to eight of the allocated 100 seats. Chuvit is listed 6th on the CT list.

19. (SBU) Thaksin, exuding confidence in the days before the election and not in a conciliatory mood, told crowds of supporters that he did not need CT's partnership, no longer trusted CT leader Banharn Silpa-archa, and would not invite the CT into his government this time around. On February 6, Thaksin reportedly said that he would consult with Banharn regarding TRT going it alone in the next government. Banharn could be looking at a spell in the opposition camp. Hinting in this direction, Banharn told the media that, though he would keep his earlier promise to support Thaksin for prime minister when Parliament reconvenes, he also acknowledged his party's duty to help bolster the system of checks and balances to counter the government.

MAHACHON PONDERES ITS FUTURE

110. (SBU) If the Democrat Party and the Chart Thai have seen their powers sharply diminished relative to the TRT, the Mahachon Party (MCP), formed only last year, may be on the way out. Projected unofficially to have won only one seat, its ambitions to become the "third force" in Thai politics appear to have collapsed. Even in the country's mostly rural, vote rich Northeast region, where it had expected to do well against TRT, MCP was swamped. For example, in Nakon Ratchasima Province, TRT appears to have swept virtually all of the 16 seats. The Mahachon Party had been tipped to win four of these seats (ref. F) - instead it won none. This former Chat Pattana (CP) stronghold is now solidly TRT country following CP's official merger with TRT late last year. Mahachon party co-founder (and former DP kingmaker) Sanan Kachornprasart has reportedly told the media that he will resign his party position and that the party should consider dissolving itself if it really had picked up only one seat.

WARNINGS OF DANGERS IN A "ONE PARTY STATE"

111. (SBU) Thaksin's political opponents and critics alike

are mourning the onset of a one party government. In their public statements, other party leaders took on a plaintive tone. Alluding to the possibility that he will be left out in the cold if Thaksin follows through on his one party government, Banharn expressed the wish that Thaksin would help the country's interests by making "more friends, not foes." Banyat, inviting CT and Mahachon to join his DP party in the opposition, admitted that even with this coalition "we may have limited scrutinizing powers." Mahachon leader Anek Laothamatas sniffed that the election "was akin to an election in a communist country."

12. (SBU) Academics and members of the country's political institutions have been even more dire in their public comments. Political Science Association of Thailand President Thiraphat Serirangsan, for example, warned that as the government's power grows, the public's rights and freedoms will contract. More mildly, former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachum commented "absolute power is not a surprise. What is important is how the power is used." (Privately, Anand is much more negative on the next four years. See septel on Ambassador's conversation with Anand on February 7.)

THAKSIN THE COLOSSUS

13. (SBU) Comment: Flush with the apparent magnitude of his victory (earlier he had predicted "not a landslide - an avalanche"), Thaksin has sounded a conciliatory note. In an attempt to reassure his critics, Thaksin said on February 6 that "four years from now, my critics in academia and the opposition will know me better. They'll realize that I really had good intentions for the country." Thaksin now appears to have the mandate to define what is good. Though the counting continues, to all appearances he has virtual legislative carte blanche to push through his programs. Ironically, the "stability" that Thaksin is celebrating looks to his critics suspiciously like the end of real political diversity in Thailand. Obviously that is not true. The opposition still has a voice in and out of Parliament, the Thai media is not stifled (despite some legitimate concerns), and there is a sitting "watchdog" Senate and active civil society. That said, the Thai electorate has given a clear sign to Thaksin that he will interpret as a mandate for his policies and satisfaction with where he has taken the country over the past four years. End Comment.

BOYCE